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ABSTRACT

This discussion paper addresses the impact of major trends in certification and credentialing on community colleges. Most community colleges are familiar with traditional credentialing and certification. However, changes in the number of people seeking higher education as a means to a better economic future and the shifting skill requirements of business and industry are creating a major impact. Colleges need to harmonize the current conflicting demands of regional credentialing, state policy and rules, and accreditation and licensure requirements. Colleges should revise their standards and documentation processes to address the reality that business and industry are becoming suspicious about the qualifications of college graduates, given the institutions' inability to document measurable skills. One of the objectives of a new credentialing model is to establish the nation's community colleges as leaders in expressing, adopting, and credentialing nationally recognized, world-class workforce standards. Recommendations for an improved model include: (1) professions should establish and clearly communicate standards for credentials and certifications to community colleges and hold faculty and the institution responsible for implementation; (2) in occupational areas, professions should take responsibility for the design of the curriculum, certificates and credentials; and (3) stakeholders' expectations regarding credentialing and certification should be identified. (JA)

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Toward New Models for Certification and Credentialing in Community Colleges

A discussion paper, presented by the National Council for Occupational Education and the National Council for Continuing Education and Training, synthesizing the deliberations from a national invitational colloquium, convened by the two Councils in July, 2000. This discussion paper was prepared by Patricia Carter, Consortium for Community College Development.

The National Council for Occupational Education (NCOE) and the National Council for Continuing Education and Training (NCCET) are affiliated councils of the American Association of Community Colleges. In July of 2000, NCOE and NCCET sponsored an invitational working colloquium designed to begin a dialogue t. ould lead to articulating the impact on community colleges of major trends in certification and credentialing. Bringing community college leaders together with practitioners who have been involved with related issues, the colloquium's primary objective was to develop a discussion paper that would present a community college perspective on the need for new models of certification and credentialing—an issue that is critical to the future development of community colleges.

Most community colleges are familiar with credentialing and certification as applied to many of our traditional programs (such as applied health, apprenticeship and contract training). However, there is evidence to indicate that we are entering a new era in which two major changes will increase their significance. Changes in the number of people seeking higher education as a means to a sounder economic future and the shifting skill requirements of business and industry are creating a major impact.

As increasing numbers of adults enter community colleges to obtain education that they believe will lead them to long-term employment, the pressure on community colleges to meet their needs is intensifying. For many of these individuals, obtaining a traditional associate's degree will be difficult and, at best, a long-term goal. They are not casual students. The uncertainty and volatile nature of the labor market has led them to believe that some form of education will guarantee stable work. They need education and training that will be validated quickly through either a job or a better job. The discussion of educational credentials and certification must be considered or held within the context of responding to the needs of this important constituency that wants its experience with a community college to translate into employment outcomes.

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At the same time, there has been a shift in the needs of the private sector. In the past, employers accepted the granting of a degree as an indication that an individual could perform on the job. The increasing technical complexity of work —at all levels—however, is now forcing them to call for more specific skills. Employers do not want people who know about computers, they need those who are proficient in a specific database or vendor program. Degrees have become far less important than specific knowledge of products and processes. The dilemma emerges of how to know that an individual, indeed, does have knowledge of these systems. Getting a job now re-

quires demonstrating knowledge and performance within a specific system. What sort of assessment systems do schools employ to test for these skills? What forms of transcripts reflect this knowledge? All of these questions will require institutional answers.

A sub-dimension of this issue has been the focus on the development of industry-based skill standards. In many industries, voluntary skill standards are being developed at the federal level, which now serve as a new communication tool to educational institutions on what skills, and at what levels of proficiency industry expects its employees to have. How can community colleges respond to these? How will firms use these standards with their community college partners in customized training, work-based learning and other areas?

The emphasis on credentials and certificates also has an impact on the future roles of community colleges. How do these short-term programs—often designed and developed by vendors—fit within the institution's curriculum? Who trains the faculty? How will these courses and programs fit within the rest of a comprehensive community college? Where will the resources come from for the development of these programs?

It is intended that this discussion paper be used as a catalyst in engaging a wide range of stakeholders in extensive dialogue that will result in the identification of a more effective and relevant national system, process or model of certification and credentialing. It reflects the collective input of the 54 educational leaders who participated in the colloquium and does not present itself as an exhaustive review, but rather as one to generate additional reaction and conversation.

This paper looks at problems and potential solutions. A brief background statement regarding concerns related to certification and credentialing follows the working definitions used for the concepts addressed in this paper. The "pressing questions" and issue statements, articulated by the colloquium, are then presented to frame the fundamental problems. The second half of the paper addresses potential solutions, presents objectives of a new model or models, and proposes related strategies.

Working Definitions:

Working definitions were established in recognition that many current discussions about certification and credentialing tend to bog down due to a lack of clarity regarding concepts. What does certification mean? Is it a complement to traditional learning? Or an alternative? Is it a precursor to it? What's its purpose? Why do we do it? Are certification and credentialing the same thing?

Certification and credentialing are not one and the same. Certification is associated with criterion-referenced performance assessment. It is occupationally focused and documents competency in discrete limited areas, validating the acquisition of skills and providing an assurance of readiness to perform in the workplace. Credentialing is a broader concept. A credential is also more generic and acknowledges the accumulation of certificates through the awarding of a document.

For purposes of this discussion the following working definitions are used: **Certificate** refers to limited breadth documentation of competency and/or performance against some standard in some field. **Credential** is the organized grouping of certification provided by some agency which leads to the award of a document and/or title. It implies confidence and/or trust.

Background:

Broad issues within society are driving a reexamination of traditional certification and credentialing practices. Traditionally, education has been organized around degrees—associates, bachelors, masters, doctorates. These degrees represent competency in a broad area and are not necessarily focused on specific skills. The fundamental belief in higher education is that degree completion is beneficial in that it provides students with deeper understanding and broader skills, preparing them to learn and adapt to changes in the workplace. But, degrees do not convey what the degree holder knows or is able to do in any precise way.

Employers, however, often have specific skill or knowledge needs which are satisfied by narrower or more focused education than that represented by a degree. The workplace has traditionally relied upon a wide variety of certifications and skill standards outside of the traditional degree system. Most community colleges have been involved in this through customized training and extension and occupational programs.

While community college certification systems appear to have more legitimacy with employers than other systems, there is a growing concern about outcomes and whether transcripts and degrees represent a guarantee of mastery of relevant skills. Employers are concerned that whatever is mastered be measured and that a system of validation is in place that is reliable. In large part these concerns have been motivated by industries of the new economy faced with rapid technological and market change who have come to place little faith in degree programs to produce a trained workforce. Traditional programs take too long to adjust to developments in the field; they generally lack industry-driven standards; and, their content is often viewed as not relevant to the real needs of the workplace.

There has also been strong growth in various sub-degree certifications, especially in the fast changing technological fields like information technology (IT). While the growth in IT is probably responsible for much of the interest in sub-degree certifications, the phenomenon is certainly not limited to these high profile cases and there is a general movement toward certification in many areas of private sector learning.

Pressing Questions—What's the Problem?

What are the implications for community colleges? What are the most pressing questions that need to be asked?

Are the current problems related to certification and credentialing symptoms of a larger systemic problem? Do community colleges lack the flexibility and capacity to be responsive to the changing needs of the workplace? It may be that community colleges need to rethink their mission and traditional organization in order to respond more effectively.

Facing rapid change, business and industry simply cannot wait for traditional responses to education and training. If they are to look to community colleges with confidence, colleges must become more adept at re-evaluating what is important to learn and in reorganizing themselves in order to deliver it. Course development time must be shortened. How and when technology is used to improve response time needs to be better identified.

Not only does program content need to change in order to meet the needs of business and industry, college culture must also change. At present there appears to be a "culture clash" between higher education, in general, and business and industry. While this may not be a new phenomenon, it is a more pressing issue today because colleges are finding themselves in the position of having to convince employers, funding sources like Workforce Investment Boards, and others that they are capable of addressing the professional development needs of the workplace and resolving the associated credentialing issues. A shift in culture needs to take place in colleges that supports thinking about students and employers as customers.

A second pressing question relates to how colleges can harmonize the current conflicting demands of regional credentialing, state policy and rules, and accreditation and licensure requirements which work against streamlining processes. The "metrics" and fundamental concepts of legislative requirements, regulatory processes and current funding models, such as "seat time," "FTE funding," and faculty credentials create limitations for colleges. If "time to market" is a significant consideration in a market-driven economy, how do we align educational accreditation processes? How can the requirements of new or changing legislation, such as the Workforce Investment Act, be met while improving speed and flexibility? And, how do we best respond to, or compete against, the influx of corporate universities, trainers, and other industry providers? What unique value do community colleges bring to a competitive marketplace? What is our niche?

Finally, how should colleges revise their standards and documentation processes to address the reality that business and industry are becoming suspicious about college "graduates" given our inability to document measurable skills? Concern is routinely expressed about the lack of consistency or uniformity in current certification and credentialing systems. Our current transcripting system is not good enough. Often grades on transcripts are found to be out of line with actual skill levels. And, even when there is congruence, the documented skills may not match those needed for the industry. Assessment, documentation and transcription practices need to be dramatically overhauled to address the current inability to assess and record skill sets (including higher order skills) and competency. How can certification, experience and employability be linked? And, how do we validate "informal learning"?

The Issues

In addressing these pressing questions, colloquium participants articulated the following key issue statements:

1. Community colleges are not responding to needs, or accepting responsibility (i.e. performing) at the level that stakeholders perceive that colleges need to in terms of credentials and certifications. Surveys of stakeholders indicate that community colleges are one part of the public educational mix that is viewed favorably. However, there is no consensus that community colleges are the only source of trained capable workers. Indeed, it appears increasingly that firms are turning to other competitors (private training com-

panies, community based organizations) or developing their own training divisions to meet their needs. There are many new players within this market creating a fluid situation that cannot be taken for granted by community colleges.

2. Stakeholders want community college certification to have meaning. This is a two-sided issue that involves the community not accepting college certifications and credentials and colleges being unwilling to take responsibility for validating their certificates and credentials. If community colleges are to be perceived as value added, they need to move further down the supply chain and not simply educate and train people for jobs, but give them credentials which employers recognize as indicating they can actually perform certain activities.

3. Community colleges have not communicated what they are doing in credentialing and certification in a lexicon that is understandable to stakeholders. Community colleges have become comprehensive institutions in which many of the new forms of credentials simply represent layers within the institution. The result is not a system of learning, but an organizational archipelago where different words, different standards, and different outcomes are practiced within the same institution. Not only does this mean that lexicons are not standardized, there also is no consistency in approaching customers. The absence of integrity within the system adds to diminishing our credibility as institutions.

4. The pace of change and the new workforce environment have exposed community colleges' internal inertia and lack of attention to aligning curriculum with the needs of the community, market forces, demographic and student changes. There are growing signs that community colleges are not responding to the demands of these markets. While many colleges continue to increase enrollments, others have actually diminished in enrollment or remained flat. This marginal growth is even more disturbing in light of the explosion of adult based learning options in four-year schools, corporate universities, and new private sector learning technologies. While wise community colleges have initiated partnerships with many of these institutions, many other colleges remain uncertain about what to do in face of this new competition.

5. Community colleges need to redesign credit and non-credit curricula, training programs, and learner support systems to be able to respond quickly to stakeholders' certification and credentialing requirements. One bright spot for many community colleges has been their rapid adoption of certification programs in many of the information technologies. Colleges need to learn from these experiences and apply the learning in other areas of their curriculum as it is highly likely that other areas of the private sector will follow the lead of the information technology sector.

6. Community colleges need to determine their role in establishing and adopting world-class standards for the work place, creating college resources to address those standards, and validating assessment of learning against those standards. There is general agreement that community colleges need to respond to the needs of the external environment. Differences exist, however, on how great a role community colleges should play in the development and assessment of these standards. This is particularly a problem in areas of new technology when it is unclear as to what role community colleges will have to play.

7. The extent to which the external agent (or vendor) can define standards, curriculum and assessment before compromising regulatory control(s) and funding mechanisms needs to be determined. Historically, community colleges have been institutions that play roles in their communities to provide higher education opportunities. State and local funding has assumed this function as paramount. How do community colleges continue this mission while integrating the goals of certification and credentialing?

8. Community colleges need to develop a credentialing system that is valid, reliable, portable, flexible, and comprehensive. Traditional distinctions between training and education are disappearing and life-long learning is a reality. Credential systems capable of regular change and adaptation to the real needs of the market need to be in place. This places an additional resource and capability burden upon the community colleges.

Potential Solutions—Objectives of a New Model

- Establish the nation's community colleges as a leader and catalyst in expressing, adopting, and credentialing nationally recognized, world-class workforce standards.
- Define world-class workforce outcomes of learning in programs and document student achievement.
- Establish community college infrastructures (e.g. faculty, staff, systems, financing, etc.) to support credentials to world-class standards.

Related Strategies

Ten strategies were identified to address each objective of an improved model:

1. **To establish the nation's community colleges as a leader and catalyst in expressing, adopting, and credentialing nationally-recognized, world class workforce standards:**

   A. Professions should establish and clearly communicate standards for credentials and certifications to community colleges and hold faculty and the institution responsible for implementation.

   B. In occupational areas, professions should take responsibility for the design of the curriculum, certificates and credentials, as is the current situation with nursing and allied health.

   C. All stakeholders' expectations regarding credentialing and certification should be identified and the model under development should incorporate quick response, innovation, flexibility, customer service attitude, entrepreneurial spirit, and world-class standards.

   D. Seek industry input into exit standards.

   E. Monitor industry patterns. Improve internal communication between the business-training unit and faculty and seek national level discussions with vendors.

F. Seek consensus on regional or national approaches; pool resources; establish consortia of colleges who agree to adhere to common practices.

G. Assemble teams of stakeholder champions to advocate for a new credentialing model.

H. Establish new levels of partnerships and strategic alliances with employers and certifying groups.

I. Aggregate small businesses and small markets to clarify needs and produce world-class strategies.

J. Navigate and influence regulatory bodies to agree to changes that would allow colleges greater flexibility; work to change public policies and funding procedures; involve ACCT and AACC via regional and national meetings and workshops; get trustees excited about meeting market needs.

2. To define world class workforce outcomes of learning in programs and document student achievement:

A. Replace the current transcript system with a *knowledge management system* that recognizes competency and includes formal and informal learning.

B. Ensure that any new system documents an individual's knowledge, skills and abilities. It may include: systematic outcomes which are measurable and designed into curriculum; evidence of performance results in organizations; internships; experience; academic achievements; certification results; license results; and standardized exam results.

C. Explore open transcripts. Establish community colleges as the site for aggregating transcripts and experience.

D. Promote the use of existing systems such as the ALX career management account.

E. Guarantee more authentic assessment and documentation of credit and non-credit performance and learning. Document work-based learning and graduates' application of what they learned.

F. Have all students take performance-based exit exams that cover general education competencies (e.g. ACT, CAP) and in occupational fields have students sit for certification exams in the occupation (e.g. Nursing, Microsoft). Consider using outside testing agencies like ETS.

G. Ensure that course and program descriptions are designed to convey outcomes, as business needs to see them.

H. Collaborate among colleges on adopting common standards.

I. Approach accrediting associations and regional accreditors, to seek support for incorporating criteria related to meeting world-class standards.

J. Market and educate on what colleges are doing. Clarify that assessment is a role of community colleges.

3. **To establish community college infrastructures (e.g. faculty, staff, systems, financing) to support credentials of world class standards:**

A. Redefine the roles and responsibilities of the 21st Century faculty. What faculty believe they were hired for and the work that needs to be done to address world class standards may vary significantly. Retrain existing faculty in new standards and hire replacements based on new skills needed as part of succession strategy. The redefined role for faculty would include: a move away for curriculum development, a key role in the documentation process and close work with stakeholders to keep informed of abilities, skills and knowledge that their students require.

B. Engage industry in evaluating faculty and the institution.

C. Have business and industry invest their name, time, and resources in curriculum development and programs to ensure the validity of the certificates and credentials.

D. Establish an Advisory Board for the president and board of trustees comprised of external stakeholders to keep college informed of critical issues, to continually raise awareness and to produce an annual "Report Card" for the institution.

E. Create design teams (consisting of general education faculty, industry representatives, program faculty, and a counselor) to design curriculum and/or quick response teams to work with faculty to redesign curricula. Establish an up front role for community colleges in assisting business and industry to establish certification equivalence as part of the curriculum design process. Include the concept of "producing a work ready" graduate as part of the colleges' mission.

F. Restructure the academic organization with a different mix of full- and part-time faculty, a cadre of professional curriculum designers familiar with the "industry," a team of outside curriculum evaluators, and individuals from each industry who do the teaching to ensure students learn the skills, knowledge, and abilities required. Realign resources and staffing patterns, build in continuous quality improvement, and outsource where appropriate.

G. Integrate credit and non-credit program and course offerings wisely, maximizing opportunities to "mainstream" workforce instruction and establish "core curriculum" and taking into account revenue implications. (How would integration add to or deplete college revenue? How does the state subsidize non-credit?)

H. Redesign/design more effective bridge programs for underprepared students to move them forward. Tailor the curriculum to individual learner needs and redesign learner support systems.

I. Explore the relationship of credentials and degrees to transfer to 4-year colleges. Identify 4-year/transfer schools willing to work together with community colleges on world-class standards.

J. Consider partnership degrees (such as PacBell and University of Redlands; North Carolina State and Carolina Power and Light) where credit for corporate/industry training programs is incorporated into the program design.

Toward a New and Better Model—Essential Components

Community colleges need to develop a credentialing system that is **valid** (i.e., integrates global programs in existence and includes local/regional employment statements); **reliable** (i.e., reflects market demand; meets standardized outcomes; and includes continuous review and update); **portable** (i.e., is globally accepted; includes nested high performance skills; and is transportable over geography); **flexible** (i.e., ensures success in learning; and is responsive, timely and dynamic); and **comprehensive** (i.e., open and inclusive with clear performance indicators).

Specific skills of educational and training programs could be broken into performance-based competencies—or "chunks"—with pre-assessment and outcomes built into each "competency cluster." "High performance" skills (including modules for English as a Second Language and Developmental Education) would be integrated into the competency clusters and subject to the same measurement of outcomes. Often referred to as "soft skills," these are, in actuality, the most important skills and are essential to the workplace.

Other essential components of a new certification or credentialing model were identified as being:

- Capacity to be delivered anytime, anyplace—a "National Network of Community Colleges" would be available to teach/manage learning/validate performance for learners entering the system at anytime, from anyplace
- Market-driven and learner/worker centered
- Focused on "learning communities"—dynamic, active online cohorts of learners, industries and college personnel
- Fluid—new competencies could be added/subtracted as performance requirements change
- Convenient—learners would take their validated competencies and put them in their "career management account" within their "lifelong learning portfolio" (ALX)
- Flexible and seamless—learners would pay for competencies completed; colleges could configure competencies into both credit and non-credit courses; colleges develop and offer the full model or competency clusters and purchase/license the packages from/to each other
- Consistent—SCANS and other standards would be matched to all competencies
- Portable and adaptable—its hallmark would be reusability and adaptability; it could cover all competencies in a worldwide curricula; could be adopted or adapted—by all colleges—individualized to States (standards, qualifications, regulations)

- Models would be co-branded and co-financed and have the visible seal of approval of all stakeholders.

Next Steps

1. Encourage AACC to keep this issue as permanent agenda item to ensure ongoing dialogue with stakeholders on community colleges' responsibility in certification and credentialing.

2. Seek AACC leadership to promote a national documentation model prototype and seek grant funding for model projects.

3. Encourage state reviews of policies and procedures, which affect the institutions' ability to respond (renewed definitions, credit/non-credit, leverage funding).

4. Champion this issue by expanding and provoking the conversation and consultation process.

5. Get endorsements from key stakeholders, including other groups and organizations currently struggling with similar issues.

6. Initiate marketing and public relations.

7. Enlist the help of NEA and AFT in the conversations related to redefining faculty roles.

8. Further explore the issue of the external agent defining standards, curriculum and assessment. Are we jeopardizing our mandate of fairness when signing very restrictive contracts? How do we choose which industries we do it for? If we do not control curriculum, why should the state support us over other deliverers? Consider possible parallels with apprenticeship where labor and management agree to a curriculum and colleges support and teach it.

Epilogue: A Time for Action

Shortly after this Colloquium was held, the Executive Committee of the American Association of Community Colleges decided to give priority to the issue of credentialing and certification. This action makes our discussions even more relevant and timely and both NCOE and NCCET look forward to working with the AACC Board in determining the best steps to take for the future. The action by AACC also confirms the general mood of many who attended our Colloquium that these issues have assumed a new importance and a new sense of urgency. We look forward to the participation in this debate and to your involvement and contributions and urge you to take an active role in the various consultations planned for the coming months.

September, 2000

NCOE/NCCET Invitational Colloquium—July, 2000
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